The University of Iowa Oral History Project

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As a part of an effort to gain a greater understanding of the history of The University of Iowa, an Oral History Project was started in May, 1976, by the University Libraries to obtain information not available in documents or through ordinary historical channels. The primary purpose of the program was to record and preserve the observations, interpretations, evaluations, and perspectives of certain individuals whose unique knowledge and experience relate to the development and growth of this University. The Oral History Project was one of several avenues suggested by Dr. Leslie W. Dunlap, dean of library administration, by Mr. Robert A. McCown, manuscripts librarian, and by an advisory committee who together crystallized a concern for gathering source material for University history. The committee decided to concentrate on people sufficiently removed from the "firing line" for at least a few years to be able to offer a detached perspective. A preliminary list of potential interviewees was compiled, from which carefully considered selections were made by the Oral History Program Advisory Committee. Forty-six individuals were selected and interviewed, including emeriti faculty members, deans, one president emeritus, and a former president of the State Board of Regents. A list of these interviewees is given at the end of this article. Because this was a one-year project staffed by a half-time interviewer/editor and part-time student transcribers, it was essential that it make progress rapidly and employ clearly defined methods. In addition to seeking individuals who could offer a sufficiently removed and valuable perspective on University history, a consistent effort was made to represent as many facets of the University, its units, programs, and community as was possible within the confines of practicality and an administration-oriented focus.

Allan Nevins was the founder of the contemporary, systematic form of oral history as a means of historical documentation. Its validity, permanence, and international recognition are now secure. Although the term "oral history" is well-established, it is actually a misnomer,

since in its usual form oral history is not history *per se*, but rather transcriptions of prime historical data for archival use. Furthermore, oral history consists not simply in collecting particular historical sources, but also in the actual creation of primary source material for potential use by research clientele with varying interests. This range of potential use is a vital consideration in determining the nature of the oral history interview, and constitutes one of the main distinctions between the oral history interview and interviews for specific historical researches or for journalism. Although the use of interviews for historical purposes reaches back to Herodotus, it was Nevins who first introduced the use of interviews to generate primary source material without imposing interviewer interpretation. Thus, as Moss states, "oral history interviewing is a systematic collection, arrangement, preservation, and publication (in the sense of making generally available) of recorded verbatim accounts and opinions of people who were witnesses to or participants in events likely to interest future scholars."[1] Oral history is predicated on the premise that a well-prepared and frank interview can comprise source material valuable for future use. Since the valid gauge of a successful project is precisely its long-term historical significance and wide applicability, coming equipped with a preliminary knowledge of the subject and creating a congenial environment for a quality interview are primary concerns of both the oral history interviewer and the oral history program.

Although historical use of interviews has classical progenitors, most individuals now involved in oral history would agree that it has become an important new trend in historical documentation. Without diminishing the contribution of Nevins, there are still a number of questions about the genesis of oral history and its justification. Why has this method developed so recently as a viable form of historical documentation, and why is it mushrooming in spite of current economic constraints? Why, as in the University of Iowa Project, has oral history so often anchored itself in the libraries and library profession, and specifically within the Manuscripts Division? How is it that the Library finds itself involved in the creation of source materials and publication at all?

As early as 40 years ago, Nevins sensed that his contemporaries and future historians would encounter new difficulties in portraying and interpreting the important personalities of our century. With the burgeoning of technology, important kinds of written evidence were quickly giving way to unrecorded long-distance telephone calls or

[1]William W. Moss, *Oral History Program Manual* (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 7.

face-to-face communication made possible by jet-age travel. What Nevins did was to employ that very technology (most notably by use of the tape recorder) to fill the documentary void which it had itself created. The modern technological environment reduces the need for conducting business or maintaining relationships solely by correspondence, nor does it encourage the detailed memoirs and personal diaries of earlier times. A hypothetical but typical example is that of today's university dean who, not obtaining sufficient response to his federal grant application for a new fine arts center, takes the next jet to Washington, D.C., to expedite the matter—most relevant transactions being completed with virtually no significant documentation. True, *paper* does proliferate. However, given our rapid transportation and systems of unrecorded communication, these papers and letters often refer only briefly to the important topic at issue, beginning, for example, "In confirmation of our phone conversation today. . . ." The oral history interview and program is specifically designed to provide sources for the more substantial insight into historical processes which simply cannot be obtained through this relatively shallow type of documentation so characteristic of our time.

The backgrounds of successful practitioners of oral history and the source materials they have employed have varied enormously—witness the cases of Oscar Lewis in his study *Five Families*, and T. Harry Williams, whose oral history biography of Huey Long won a Pulitzer Prize. However, of all professionals involved in such documentation, librarians are perhaps foremost. There are a number of reasons for this which merit greater attention in the literature. One significant reason for library and librarian involvement in oral history is that those libraries with manuscripts divisions have a ready-made framework particularly well suited to the processing and management of oral history research materials. Oral history can be an expensive endeavor, fraught with legal difficulties regarding ownership of source materials and associated literary rights. Since the manuscripts division is familiar with such questions, expenses can be minimized by building an oral history program under the auspices of the library and its manuscripts division. In our own project there were a number of additional advantages, not the least of which was the proximity of the University Archives; the Archives proved indispensable to the interviewer for researching the history of the University, University-related events, particular interviewees, their University involvements, and their views. The actual compilation of oral history source material is thus a logical extension of the libraries' role in providing access to information.

A broad range of research objectives may also be pursued using the oral history method. Projects have centered around governmental

agencies, e.g., the Strategic Air Command and the Tennessee Valley Authority, and specific individuals or ethnic groups, e.g., the Doris Duke Indian Oral History Project at the University of Utah. Although these kinds of oral history began to burgeon in the early 1960s, the first major effort to use oral history to document the history of an academic institution did not come until May of 1968 in conjunction with the campus unrest at Columbia University. Until that time, attempts to document changes in the educational make-up of our nation had not adequately used the resources developed by oral history. As Charles Morrissey pointed out, ". . . efforts to write the histories of colleges and universities have rarely received the professional support they warrant. Too often a proposal to write an institution's history has been regarded as suspect because these histories often become exercises in nostalgia."[2] As mentioned, the University of Iowa Oral History Project was by no means an attempt to write university history, but rather an attempt to create source material for academic historical use. Nevertheless, the cautions of Morrissey and others about the particular difficulties of university history documentation were taken into account when planning the project. For example, it can be argued that a rather elite academic oral history project, which focuses on articulate narrators, accustomed to publishing and skilled in lecture style, may be at odds with the general thrust of oral history, which prefers conversational candor over a too-carefully articulated, too predictable presentation. The interviewer on this project attempted to strike a balance between formal preparation on the part of the interviewee and informal conversational style.

Subsequent to the interviewee's acceptance of an invitation to participate in the University of Iowa Libraries' Project, the interview process usually involved two sessions. First the interviewer, relying heavily on the resources of the University Archives, formulated a detailed picture of the role played by a given interviewee in the history of the University and then designed a series of prospective interview topics. An initial meeting was arranged with the narrator in which the interviewer explained oral history procedure, submitted his list of specific topics for interviewee response and refinement, explained legal considerations necessary to the consignment of papers, and generally tried to build rapport with the narrator. A date for the taping session was decided upon, before which time the interviewer could do further research, planning, and reorganization. Then, in the second meet-

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[2]Charles T. Morrissey, "Oral History on Campus: Recording Changes in Higher Education," *Dartmouth College Library Bulletin,* XI(NS), no. 2 (April, 1971), p. 74.

ing, a series of questions developed from the agreed-upon topical areas and centering around the narrator's University experiences and perceptions was discussed in tape-recorded interview, sometimes extending to as many as four or even five sessions. The terms of the consignment of literary and property rights were also usually settled at this time.

The tapes were next transcribed into typescript and subsequently edited. The editor's goal in this project was to transform the spoken word into the written so that the researcher's eventual use of the information would be facilitated, while at the same time preserving the freshness, candor, and conversational integrity of the tape-recorded interview. The first edited transcript was returned to the interviewee for his or her editing, corrections, and approval. Later, an index to each interview was compiled; integration of the indices from all the transcripts provides a comprehensive index to the entire collection. Each of the 46 University of Iowa Oral History Project interviews has been bound in duplicate: one copy for deposit in the University Archives, the other for presentation to the respective narrator.

Researchers interested in various aspects of University history are now welcome to consult these edited transcripts in the Special Collections Department of the University of Iowa Libraries. Only a few of the many topics and incidents included within the total collection can be noted here as typical of the contents.

1. Development of the Iowa Medical Compensation Plan, which in the 1940s revolutionized the financial structure of the College of Medicine. The narration includes many aspects of the plan and viewpoints of various people involved in its formulation, those who were affected by it, and those on the outside observing from other units of the University. The plan proved to be enduring and was eventually widely imitated by other academic institutions, although originally it was decried as socialistic. Some key University figures left during this controversy.

2. Curricular developments—for example, the Liberal Arts curriculum revision of 1942-1944, in which conflict between the personalities and philosophies of Dean Harry K. Newburn of the College of Liberal Arts and Norman Foerster, a proponent of humanities-centered liberal education in the tradition of Irving Babbitt, played an important part.

3. Information on specific individuals in various contexts—for example, Carl Seashore, who was dean of the Graduate College from 1908 to 1936 and 1942 to 1946, Chester A. Phillips, dean of the College of Commerce from 1921 to 1950, and Virgil Hancher, president of the University from 1940 to 1964.

4. The processes by which people take office, assume, receive, and

relinquish power—for example, how President Virgil Hancher came to office, from his wife's perspective, and from that of faculty. Susan Hancher's narration is a special, personal, and interesting look into the workings of her husband's mind. Also narrated are details of the Hancher–Bowen transition and its implications.

5. Building projects and building rejuvenations—for example, the restoration of Old Capitol, the construction of the College of Pharmacy building, and the University Main Library. (In the latter instance, Allin Dakin relates how, just before he became Administrative Dean in 1944, President Hancher was so discouraged and uncertain about the future well-being of the University, partly because of the difficulty in securing funds for an adequate, centralized Main Library, that he wrote Dakin stating that perhaps it would be best if Dakin did not come. The State University of Iowa was in fact one of the last of the Big Ten to have a central library.) Other topics relating to University buildings include expansions of the University Hospitals; the first use of bonding in securing building additions, a significant development in the history of the University; the securing of the Elliot family's art collection to serve as the basis of the Art Museum. This gift was predicated on an appropriate home for the collection (in the early 1960s estimated to cost more than one million dollars). The eventual building of the Art Museum was the first project of the new University of Iowa Foundation, and proved to be a real baptism by fire.

6. Formation of specific programs—for example, Paul Engle's International Writing Program, as narrated by John Gerber, then head of the Department of English and the School of Letters.

7. University relationships to state and national political affairs and to other state units of higher education—for example, the backlash of the Depression and Iowa's slow recovery; the implications of President Hancher's controversy with conservative Governor William Beardsley; the unrest of the 1960s, as viewed by Max Hawkins, head of the Office of State Relations and Legislative Liaison.

8. Founding or rejuvenation of specific units within the University—for example, the founding and development of the University Hospital School and its relationships with the College of Medicine and the College of Education; the rejuvenation of the Alumni Association in 1947, which coincided with the 100th anniversary of the University. The role of the rejuvenated Alumni Association in public and alumni relations, beginning almost to the year with the term of Governor William Beardsley, is also treated.

9. University athletics—for example, reminiscences of the famous "Ironmen," of the 1929 suspension of Iowa from the Big Ten based on the Carnegie Foundation Report, which claimed Iowa was guilty of

shaky subsidizing and recruiting practices—all this related by Eric Wilson, who was in charge of sports information and public relations at the time, and responsible for putting the University in its best light. In addition, building projects related to University athletics are discussed—for example, the construction of the new field house in 1927 (then the most modern and advanced facility of its kind in the nation), Paul Belting's role in erecting this, and how it was announced without the prior knowledge of many in the University, including the director of sports information. Also available are glimpses of a number of individuals associated with athletics at The University of Iowa, such as Forest Evashevski, Howard Jones, who coached the U of I team to the Big Ten championship in 1921, and Knute Rockne, who almost came to Iowa, but then changed his mind.

10. The vicissitudes of well-known individuals while at The University of Iowa—for example, Grant Wood, E. C. Mabie (Drama), Lester Longman (Art), and Philip Greeley Clapp (Music). These last three men were truly in the old Jessup autocratic tradition, and together were active in forging "culture in the cornfield."

11. Departmental fissions and the consequent founding of new departments—for example, while Carl E. Seashore was dean of the Graduate College a case came to his attention in which a student had come to the University specifically to study with A. Craig Baird, the founder of international debate and at that time a faculty member in the Department of English. The student was not able to do graduate work under Baird and so told Seashore that he planned to leave for another institution. On the spot, Seashore created the Department of Speech and its graduate program, and individually approved each of its students' graduate research topics. Seashore held a kind of unquestioned power which would not be possible today, but which at the time was remarkably effective and served as the primary tool in the formation of the University's Graduate College.

12. Comments on major national events as they affected The University of Iowa—for example, the unrest of the 1960s (narrated by President Emeritus Howard Bowen), the Depression, World War I, and World War II, the close of which signalled an influx of federal funding and influence.

13. The demise of certain University units—for example, the University Schools, narrated by Dr. Herbert Spitzer, long-time director of the University Elementary School; and the Child Welfare Research Station, as recalled by Dr. Ruth Updegraff, who had given the Station nearly 50 years of service.

14. Finally, it is interesting to note that some narrations among the project transcripts reach back much further in time than was at first

expected, especially in instances where the interviewees had fathers and mothers who were also associated with this institution. For example, there is a brief account of one interviewee's father, who was trained as a student in physics and chemistry under the noted University of Iowa professor Gustavus Hinrichs at the time when the world of science was in the throes of Darwinism.

Much information about the past 50 years or so of this University is rapidly disappearing; nevertheless, there are still many individuals who played key roles in those years who remember them vividly. It is unlikely that many people today will preserve their recollections in personal memoirs. However, as this project has shown, many are willing to confide their vivid observations and memories of particular historical episodes in a well-prepared and pleasant oral history interview. While individual transcripts can be highly personal and fragmentary, taken together with others they provide a wealth of incident and detail invaluable for future research. The collection resulting from this project is, again, not history *per se,* but historical source material comprising some 3,000 pages of indexed transcript, open, under minimal restrictions, to future research into the history of The University of Iowa.

Participants in the University of Iowa Oral History Project

Name	*Academic Area*
A. Craig Baird	Speech
Joseph E. Baker	European Literature and Thought
Harold W. Beams	Zoology
Gustav Bergmann	Philosophy
Perry A. Bond	Chemistry
Irving H. Borts	Hygiene & Preventive Medicine, State Bacteriological Laboratory
Lois Boulware	Student Health Service
Howard R. Bowen	President
Alson E. Braley	Ophthalmology
William D. Coder	Conferences and Institutes
Carroll Coleman	Typography, School of Journalism, University Publications
Allin W. Dakin	Administrative Dean

Elmer L. DeGowin	Internal Medicine
Helen E. Focht	Office of the Dean of Students
John C. Gerber	English
Susan Hancher	President's Wife
Robert C. Hardin	Internal Medicine, Health Affairs
H. Clay Harshbarger	Speech
Max Hawkins	State Relations
Loren L. Hickerson	Alumni Association, Iowa Center for the Arts
Joseph W. Howe	Mechanics and Hydraulics
Paul E. Huston	Psychiatric Hospital
Frederick W. Kent	Photographic Service
Mason Ladd	Law
Everet F. Lindquist	Education, Iowa Testing Programs
W. Ross Livingston	History
Baldwin Maxwell	English
Sidney E. Mead	Religion, History
Carl H. Menzer	WSUI Radio
Leslie G. Moeller	Journalism
Paul R. Olson	Economics
Stanley E. Redeker	Board of Regents
Raymond E. Rembolt	Hospital School
Charles B. Righter	Music, Administrative Services
Adolph L. Sahs	Neurology
M. Gladys Scott	Physical Education for Women
Herbert F. Spitzer	University Elementary School
Duane C. Spriestersbach	Otolaryngology and Maxillofacial Surgery, Speech Pathology and Audiology, Graduate College
James B. Stroud	Educational Psychology
Dewey B. Stuit	Dean of Liberal Arts
Ruth Updegraff	Institute of Child Behavior and Development
Himie Voxman	Music
Lawrence Ware	Electrical Engineering
Eric C. Wilson	Sports Information
Pearl Zemlicka	Nursing
Louis C. Zopf	Pharmacy

Bound transcripts of the first nine interviews to be completed in the University of Iowa Oral History Project.